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All-Star Game 2006

American leapfrogs National, 3-2, to take another All-Star Game

Young's two-run triple brings familiar, deflating finish

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By Dejan Kovacevic, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For one fleeting but fantastic evening, Major League Baseball was back in Pittsburgh.

From the big names and bright lights of national television, to the chants that shook majestic PNC Park as the Pirates were introduced, to the thousands of fans hanging along the Clemente Bridge railing trying to sneak a peak, to the honest-to-goodness drama of a game that mattered.

All this and ...

Oh, no.

Not that.

Bob Donaldson, Post-Gazette
The Nationals' Alfonso Soriano is tagged out at the plate by Tigers catcher Ivan Rodriguez in the third inning last night in the 77th All-Star Game at PNC Park.
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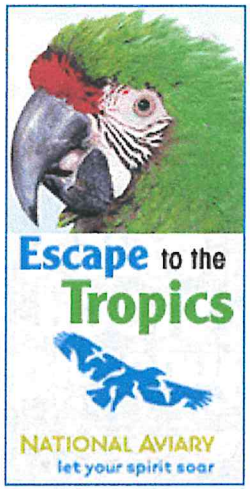

Anything but another one-run loss.

A two-run triple by the Texas Rangers' Michael Young with two outs and a two-strike count in the top of the ninth inning -- against Trevor Hoffman, no less -- vaulted the American League past the National, 3-2, to put a sizzling finish on the 77th edition of the All-Star Game last night.

The most significant impact was that the American side extended its string of success to 9-0-1, three victories shy of the classic's longest run, and reclaimed home-field advantage for the World Series.

But the immediate effect of Young's drive was to silence the overflow crowd of 38,904 that had seen this sort of thing before: The Pirates' 25 one-run losses are the most in baseball history before the break.

"I couldn't believe it," Jason Bay said from his familiar stall in the home clubhouse.

"It hurts," Freddy Sanchez said across the room. "It hurts just like it has all season."

To be sure, no one hurt like Hoffman, the San Diego Padres' closer who is 19 shy of Lee Smith's all-time saves mark.

"It's not much fun," Hoffman said. "But that's why this role is what it is. You've got to go out there and close the door when you've got 'em down."

He came on for the ninth to the familiar

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sound of AC/DC's "Hell's Bells," holding a 2-1 lead. And, when he quickly retired Jermaine Dye and Miguel Tejada on comebackers, that door seemed all but slammed.

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Not in this place, though.

Paul Konerko knifed a first-pitch single through the left side to keep the American dugout lively.

"Actually, we thought it would take three hits to get him all the way around," his Chicago White Sox teammate, A.J. Pierzynski said, kidding. "Seriously, though, we believed. We didn't come here not to win this game. And we still had some pretty good hitters coming up."

Troy Glaus pulled a ground-rule double to left that almost stayed in play to tie the score, but it skipped just over the 6-foot fence and halted pinch-runner Jose Lopez at third.

"I played here last year, and it's far out there," Glaus said. "I was hoping it would rattle around down there."

Now, the confidence was brimming.

"After my first two guys got out real quick, I was turning to my coaches, and I said, 'Why me? Why do I have to lose this game?' " American manager Ozzie Guillen recalled. "But then, when those two guys get on base, we have one of the best pure hitters in baseball at the plate."

He remembered, too, a word from shortstop Derek Jeter.

"He said, 'Michael will win the game if he comes to hit.' And he did."

Young fouled off Hoffman's first two pitches -- fastball and the trademark changeup -- to dig an 0-2 hole.

He had correctly predicted each pitch but, as he put it, "Clearly, my thinking was doing me no good."

So, he tried another approach.

"See the ball, and make some contact."

He was straight and true with the third offering, a low fastball, and lasered it to the wall in right-center for a triple, enough to earn All-Star most valuable player honors with his only hit in two at-bats as a late substitution.

"I'm not going to lie: This is a pretty big highlight in my career," Young said. "I think everyone dreams of having a big All-Star Game."

"Give him credit," Hoffman said. "I made the pitch, and he hit it."

Mariano Rivera closed it out in the bottom of the ninth by stranding a man at second after Carlos Beltran had reached on an error and advanced on a groundout, thus capping a magnificent all-around pitching performance on each side.

It made for the fewest runs since five in 2001 at Seattle, and the 2:33 game time was the quickest since one seven minutes shorter in 1988 at Cincinnati.

"Hey, they say good pitching beats good hitting," Jeter said. "And that's what you saw tonight."

Until the ninth, the mighty American lineup had managed only four hits, had two runners past first base and had not scored since Vladimir Guerrero's second-inning home run against starter Brad Penny.

After Penny impressively struck out Ichiro Suzuki, Jeter and David Ortiz in the first -- 21 pitches, all fastballs, some of them 99 mph -- he tried to get more high heat by Guerrero with one out in the next inning, but Guerrero tomahawked a 98-mph offering just above the Clemente Wall for a 1-0 American lead.

The National got that right back in the bottom half when David Wright lined a flat changeup from starter Kenny Rogers inside the left-field foul pole.

Then, it took the lead on some small ball in the third.

Alfonso Soriano singled after one out, stole second and ran through a stop sign in trying to score on Beltran's liner to center, but Vernon Wells' one-hop strike to catcher Ivan Rodriguez nailed him.

No matter. Beltran stole third and scored on Roy Halladay's wild pitch to bring the National its first lead since the eighth inning of the 2003 game.

From there?

Almost nothing.

On the National end, Roy Oswalt, Brandon Webb, Bronson Arroyo, Brian Fuentes, Derrick Turnbow and Tom Gordon each delivered a scoreless inning of relief.

On the American, Halladay went two, and Barry Zito, Scott Kazmir, Johan Santana and B.J. Ryan went one each to set up Rivera. They held the National lineup hitless in the final five innings.

"You look at the great pitching both sides had, and it doesn't surprise you," National manager Phil Garner said.

It was the first time the National lost in the five games played in Pittsburgh, though the local contingent represented itself well.

Bay lined a fourth-inning single in three at-bats, and Sanchez, although he was 0 for 2, turned in two of the game's slickest defensive plays, including a leaping grab at shortstop that put down the fifth inning and brought the crowd to its feet with a chant of "Fred-dy!"

It has been a trying year here, in many ways, but one who has experienced it all had little difficulty finding a bright spot.

"What an atmosphere, what a crowd," Sanchez said. "But you know what? They've been like this all year. We haven't won many games, and they've still been out here supporting us. This is a sports town, a baseball town, and that's why I love playing here and want to play here for many, many years to come."

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*(Dejan Kovacevic can be reached at **dkovacevic@post-gazette.com**.)*

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